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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: CHILD LABOR SHIFTING FROM COTTON TO
OTHER SECTORS

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Following the release of the Labor Department's report on International Child Labor, which documented the presence of child labor in Azerbaijan's cotton industry, Embassy Baku spoke with local NGOs in Baku, Berda, and Imishli, as well as Baku representatives of the ILO and UNICEF, to learn more about child labor in today's Azerbaijan. The groups report that while child labor is commonly seen in both Baku and the countryside, the vast majority of children involved are either working for or alongside their families. The groups further report that as the cotton sector continues to decline, child labor is moving to other sectors, including other crops, restaurants, car repair workshops, and what ILO referred to as the "worst forms," namely drugs, prostitution, and human trafficking. End Summary.

UNICEF, ILO Comment on Child Labor

¶2. (U) According to UNICEF statistics, 13 percent of all children in Azerbaijan aged between 5 and 15 are engaged in some type of work, and 0.3 percent are engaged in paid work. Azerbaijani law allows 14 year-olds to work without parental consent; 15 year-olds do not require parental consent.

¶3. (SBU) ILO Representative Yashar Hamzayev reports that in hotels and restaurants throughout Azerbaijan children work as waiters, and that customers find this normal. Hamzayev says that he recently asked a waiter in Quba his age and the waiter said he was ten. Hamzayev says the families have their children work because they need the income, while some employers prefer children because of the lower labor cost. COMMENT: Embassy staff have often seen children who clearly appear to be under the age of 18 working in restaurants, but have not personally seen children who are obviously under the age of 14. End Comment.

¶4. (SBU) Hamzayev says that cotton is still the top employer of children in Azerbaijan, even though falling cotton prices have caused the sector to collapse. Mazahir Gasimov, Deputy Head of the Berda Executive Authority, told EconOff that his region, the top cotton-producer in Azerbaijan, has seen production fall from 32,000 hectares in Soviet times to 1,700 hectares today (a fall of 95 percent). Hamzayev says the number two employer of child labor is the services sector, primarily restaurants and car repair workshops.

¶5. (SBU) Hamzayev said that the "worst forms" of child labor (drug sales, prostitution, and human trafficking) employ a

small but growing number of children, and that sector has become substantially more organized since 2002. He said that he has "personally seen" children selling drugs in the streets of Baku, and that dealers prefer to let the children do the sales because they do not want to be caught by the police. He also said that in some cases children are sent to resorts in Dubai and Turkey and promised jobs in the hospitality industry, but on arrival are sent into prostitution. COMMENT: The embassy has no evidence of such trafficking from other sources, which causes us to suspect the number of children trafficked to other countries is low. End Comment.

¶16. (SBU) Munir Mammadov of UNICEF agreed that child labor in Azerbaijan "is a problem, but it is not researched or studied well." He says that UNICEF was not able to do a report this year due to a lack of funds, but hopes to do one in the future (possibly this year). Mammadov said that he has seen children working in shops, restaurants, bazaars, and public transit in Baku, but a "good sign is that the GOAJ is accepting this as a problem." Mammadov said that the GOAJ is ready to sign international protocols for "prestige," but does not always follow through on enforcement and seldom gives reports to international bodies. Mammadov said that most children working in rural areas are either working for or alongside their families, and that it is a matter of "survival" for families at the bottom of the economic ladder.

Embassy Visits Berda, Imishli

¶17. (SBU) EconOff traveled to Berda and Imishli in

mid-September, at the start of the cotton harvest, and witnessed child labor in the fields (Berda and Imishli are in the heart of Azerbaijan's cotton-producing area.) When asked why he did not go to school, one boy (who said he was 17) responded, "Why should I go to school? I will just sit there for no reason for two more years, and then I will come back to work here. I should start working now." In another field, Embassy staff photographed a girl who looked approximately ten years old working alongside older staff (one of whom appeared to be a relative), but then managers appeared and it became impossible to ask meaningful questions. (NOTE: A copy of this photo is available on request - send an unclass email to AriturksS@state.gov. End note.)

¶18. (SBU) One local NGO that had been monitoring child labor is now being shut down. Sadagat Gambarova, the Director of Labor Relations for the National Confederation of Entrepreneurs (known by its Azeri acronym ASK) says that her group has been taken over by Mammad Musayev (who is connected to the powerful Minister of Emergency Situations Kemaladdin Heydarov) and that Musayev has begun dismantling the organization. Gambarova said that in the last four years she has met with one thousand children, but she said "not all can be considered 'child labor,' because some just help their families for one or two hours a day, while others are removed from schools and appear psychologically damaged."

¶19. (SBU) Gambarova said that while large agro-producers like Azersun monitor their own staff and do not hire those under 16, they still buy crops from the farms of families that employ their own children. "I traveled to the Southern regions of Azerbaijan, where Talysh is spoken as a first language, and although the schools teach in Azerbaijani, the children I meet do not speak Azerbaijani, which tells me they have not been to school." She closed by lamenting, "in Soviet times, there were penalties for not sending children to school, but now there are no mechanisms."

¶10. Elgiz Salahov, an attorney in Berda who works as the regional representative for ASK, said that his NGO "is being suffocated because we fought corruption - the authorities even came in here and took away my (ASK) stamp." The loss of the organization's stamp renders Salahov unable to register documents, which means his actions and decisions are

considered unofficial and without any authority. Salahov said that ASK used to have 38 offices across the country, but will soon reduce that number to five, and will only maintain offices where they can be co-located with an Agrokredit bank, which he said was run by Mammad Musayev. "In one or two years, ASK will stop functioning, but I will go on," he said. "The people in this town know me and need my legal services - I will continue to help them." Given the general GOAJ trend of harassing those who stand against corruption, it's unclear that Salahov would be able to continue offering such services indefinitely, or that he could be succeeded by a similar do-gooder when he retires.

¶11. COMMENT: It's unclear if a campaign against child labor would be tackling a problem or tackling a symptom. Rural schools throughout Azerbaijan suffer from poor infrastructure and poorly paid, unmotivated teachers. This year the GOAJ actually lowered the score required to enter secondary school, as not enough children reached the previously required score. If the children working in the cotton fields (or their parents) do not feel the local school is worth their time, it's hard to imagine an effective fight against child labor. At the same time, Sadagat Gambarova makes the point that penalties for not sending a child to school did seem to have an effect in Soviet times. It's not clear whether a stick would be more useful than a carrot in today's Azerbaijan, but it is clear that the GOAJ is not effectively implementing either sticks or carrots at this time. The problem only affects the poorest Azerbaijanis who do not benefit from the country's oil wealth - a slice of society that does not appear to be getting smaller, particularly in rural areas. End Comment.
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